Why can't we Americans do what the Afghans did, and take back control of our country?

*By **Al Stankard**, a political dissident and novelist living in New York City.*

FILE PHOTO. © AFP / GABRIELLE LURIE

The death of friends due to Covid lockdowns and political persecution won't discourage us – instead, they plant in us new seeds of resistance. Crappy movies and books can't distract us forever.

Since the Taliban's unexpected success in reclaiming their country, the one thing I've been losing sleep over is, well, why can't we have what they have? Are we Americans really so gaslit and demoralized by the self-

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anointed "adults in the room" that we dare not challenge their presence? Things are already bad and getting worse for too many of us. The ongoing improperly motivated Covid lockdowns and vaccine mandates are backing many of us into corners out of which we have no choice but to fight.

Just the other day, I was riding a public bus to purchase a vehicle in a distant town. The driver refused admittance to a scraggly man who had clearly been waiting for too long under the scorching sun. In all but America's greatest metropolises, to ride the bus is to be a member of the nation's underclass. It means you are carless, and might as well be shoeless.

On this particularly sweltering day, the scraggly man was told there was no room on the bus for him, and he would have to wait a half-hour more for the next bus. Our bus was almost completely empty, yet Covid restrictions were such that 75% of seats had to remain empty. Swerving, the driver barked into his mirror at another passenger to pull his mask up over his nose.

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My mind drifted to my best friend, Alex Häkkinen, the father of my godchild. Alex had supported me both artistically and politically since I was in college, both before and after I dropped out in 2009, three years into a physics degree. He supported me both financially and emotionally, both when I was riding the rails and when I was writing and producing avant-garde dissident plays in New York City.

Alex is the only person I know to have died as a result of Covid and its lockdowns. In his case, he took his life this past April, aged 37, with a massive, deliberate dose of an industrial solvent. Alex, a cosmonaut and lifelong advocate of responsible drug use, had always embraced such substances for their powerfully hypnotic, sleep-inducing qualities.

On the bus was a worn-out man hiding a puppy in a paper bag – puppies, like maskless faces, are not allowed on the bus. But the puppy's presence brought me and my fellow passengers out of our respective shells. We chatted. A particularly flustered young man on the bus, I learnt, was on his way to a drug-related court appointment in the state capital. We spoke of his reliance on the bus, and how he had had to reschedule his court date due to some bus-related logistical dilemma he had faced. I could not help but wonder about the scraggly man who had been denied a seat on the bus, how badly his day might have been screwed, and how much further he would be pushed off the chessboard of American society.

At yet another stop, a man with a pronounced juggalo aspect but sharp eyes got on. He was visibly resistant to having to keep a mask up over his nose. When I noticed his eyes darting around at me and the other passengers as he reluctantly dug into his pocket for one, I felt the ageless spirit of insurrection sweep over me. "*I don't care if you don't wear a mask,*" I volunteered. A handful of us, even a middle-aged lady seated nearby, burst into discussion. The cure was worse than the disease, and our compliance with the

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ruling class's agenda was not only destroying our individual lives, but, in doing so, eroding all of mankind's dearest hopes of a better world.

I vocally tinkered with the idea of all of us refusing to wear our masks. The middle-aged lady gently pushed back on my words, certain that such a mutiny would attract police intervention. "*No, you don't understand*," I explained to her. "*If everybody were to refuse to comply, then the authorities would lose all power over us.*" She acknowledged this fundamental point, yet I quieted down all the same. Today would not be the day. But I felt a newfound optimism about the possibility of revolution in an American population so thoroughly inoculated against the very notion of collective group action.

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As we all settled down, I looked out of the window. Alex's death had emboldened me to write a previous op-ed for RT back in May, but that boldness had, by now, mostly withered. Although I miss Alex dearly, and regret that I was too bogged down in my own lockdown-related tribulations to intervene, even when I knew he would soon kill himself, I understand that his sacrifice has breathed a new vigor into my own life that had so profoundly overlapped with his own. I searched my memory for other people I had known who had passed away. It took me a moment, but I recalled Andrew Dodson, a man with whom I had corresponded extensively about the American political situation back in 2016 until his death in March 2018, aged 34.

Andrew, an electrical engineering student in Boston, had died in the long, drawn-out aftermath of 2017's Unite the Right rally. I had connected him with a journalist at The Atlantic that I had met the year before. Daniel Lombroso had struck me as somewhat enlightened, and so I had kept in touch with him. After all, I had always enjoyed reading The Atlantic for the intellectual detachment I perceived in it. When Daniel had asked if I'd been present at Unite the Right, and, if not, whether I could connect him with somebody who had been, Andrew immediately came to mind.

While I have no idea what went on between the two of them, Andrew messaged me some days later, angrily complaining that "*my guy*" had betrayed him, doxxing him by name and putting him in danger of baseless legal persecution and career destruction. I didn't know how to respond. I confronted Daniel about it and he washed his hands of it, insisting that Andrew had freely revealed his identity himself. Though it may be true that Andrew had freely revealed his identity, and that Daniel had more or less abided by boilerplate journalistic ethics, the raw material of Daniel's reporting nevertheless kicked off a chain of events that eventually led to Andrew's death via a massive heroin overdose. After being the target of relentless "*antifascist activism*," he lost his job and was excommunicated from his social life after being outed as a furry. I talked to Andrew regularly during his downward spiral of the next six months. Even if I'm not supposed to call it a deliberate suicide, it was most certainly a death of despair.

Our society – its power structure, at least – relishes any opportunity to facilitate the self-destruction of whosoever ceases to fear it. Despite being an integral part of the ideological apparatus that ended in Andrew's death, even if he doesn't bear personal culpability per se, Daniel went on to assemble his footage of alt-right political activities into a well-funded documentary produced by The Atlantic, its biases carefully cropped from view. The Atlantic is owned by the so-called Emerson Collective, the sole purpose of which is

political advocacy through "impact investments." It was founded by Apple heiress Laurene Powell Jobs (net worth $17.7 billion), and the sole purpose of that political advocacy, in turn, is to safeguard, however obliquely, the interests of heiresses and billionaires such as Laurene Powell Jobs. Daniel Lombroso is not and never was open-minded – he is a careerist.

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The norm persists that revolutionary inklings in America are deftly co-opted and misdirected – if not murderously nipped in the bud, as was the case with Andrew – by the ideological and cultural apparatuses of the investor class. Would-be dissidents are corralled, generally along racial lines, either in the direction of mindless boomer patriotism or else anti-white identity politics. How much money trickles down to you from the largesse of the post-American global economy depends on how paradoxical and self-defeating your anti-establishment ideals are.

A prime example of how would-be speakers of truth neuter their own messages can be found in the Aspen Institute's Anand Giridharadas's 'Winners Take All'. The book could have been a seismic indictment of the ways and means of global capital's death grip on humanity, but it wavers between silence and complicity in its subtle bait-and-switch, allowing whiteness to exist as the tashlich fish for the sins of the investor class and their agents. Giridharadas's would-be savior from the iniquity wrought by so-called non-profit foundations, Darren Walker – an outwardly repentant president of the Ford Foundation – is proved by Giridharadas to be

a false messiah.

Damningly, however, the book identifies Walker as such only after he literally becomes a paid spokesman for PepsiCo, even when he had, all along, zealously conflated richness with whiteness. The conflation of richness with whiteness should be taken as the gold standard of phony scrutiny of the ruling class. Because Giridharadas's book only barely misses the mark of speaking truth to power, meeting just the minimum quantum of establishment-friendliness, however, its publication was greeted with far less fanfare than other books, such as Isabel Wilkerson's disingenuous 'Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents' or Ijeoma Oluo's sophomoric and genocidal 'Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America', etc. If you're going to betray revolution, Anand, don't tiptoe around about it.

Though it may seem a law of nature that the enemies of humanity wield absolute power as kingmakers and agenda-setters, this is an illusion. The cards are not marked in advance. History's Davids and Goliaths were not forged into myth ex nihilo. Due to the stultifying effect of ideological strings that come attached to signal-boosting funds and resources allotted to thinkers and dramatists, there is an ongoing renaissance, in the world of letters, among those who refuse to fall into rank under our prevailing power structure, which privileges the few at the expense of the many.

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What these underdogs lack in resources, they make up for in creativity and determination to sway the minds of the restless. Where establishment-friendly dramatists today see their asinine visions fast-

to control the past, and hence the present

tracked to become big-budget (or even any-budget) films, dissident writers wage a guerrilla war through self-published books. The names of outsider artists such as Brandon Adamson, Francis Nally, Ben Arzate, Robert Stark, and Matthew Pegas come to mind. Instead of writing and directing films like the "talented" Edson Oda's 'Nine Days' (2020) – it's just a pretentious, Afrocentric rehash of 2007's 'Wristcutters: A Love Story' – they write underground books with an earnestness that is all but forgotten in our day and age. While the standard bearers of the prevailing cult of the individual are busy forever declaring victory in a culture war they have supposedly long since won, there are those among us fighting, however humbly, a culture war whose existence the ruling class cannot bring itself to acknowledge.

In Matthew Pegas's 'Dragon Day' – an exquisitely structured 'Rules of Attraction' for an age in which the scapegoating of low-status white males is a celebrated ritual – one such outsider is forced to endure and ultimately triumph over academia's cynical opportunists. Wolves in sheep's clothing, they speak in upvoice as they zealously throw other white males, such as the novel's protagonist, under the bus for their own career advancement. The villain is a charismatic professor at a small liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania. Despite being an ostensible leftist, he in fact commutes each weekend to New York City to join his – drumroll – corporate lawyer wife at their penthouse apartment. Insidiously, the professor moonlights online as an anonymous pied piper, leading young incels like the protagonist down the ruinous and self-defeating path of hierarchy worship. Instead of signaling to the unimaginative masses the bounds of permitted discourse within polite society, where our eyes may gaze and where they may not, authors such as Pegas and others operate at the fringes, swaying not the frightful many but the indomitable few.

The cliché that man's predilections for self-interested opportunism and vanity render stillborn all efforts of collective group action in the pursuit of justice – it is a lie. The evil embodied by our current social order is no less evil, nor more viable, simply for the fact that it enfranchises and domesticates opportunism, rather than taking half-measures to stymie it. The end game of the American world order is unendurable for most of us, and we are slowly but surely building the cultural vocabulary with which to say as much. A better world is possible.

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